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Viewing the child as a participant within context

by Jonathan Rix and Alice Matthews

Introduction

This article is first authored by a parent who is as researcher who lives in England. It results from the first author's re-evaluation of their experiences in meetings with professionals in light of research he conducted with parents and professionals engaging in pre-school early intervention programmes. In particular, this paper reports upon the first author's reflection upon data supplied by a father, Adrian, in relation to his son, Billy. At the time of conducting the research Adrian had attended over 40 formal meetings with staff at nursery and school settings, as well as having had numerous other informal meetings with practitioners in the family home and during drop off and pick up times. Billy, had developed many important relationships with these practitioners and despite some disagreements along the way the work they undertook was highly respected by Adrian and his family. Adrian reported that during these meetings a great many significant issues had been discussed which never appeared within the documentation; all of these issues were associated with relationships within the wider support context which had varying degrees of impact upon his child and the support he received. The first author's perception was that the focus of all the documentation was upon Billy as an individual in separation from the context in which he was learning and

growing up. This perception was highlighted as a wider issue following discussions with the second author who was analysing the data from the research with parents and professionals involved in early intervention programmes. This paper arises from the themes which emerged from this early intervention research, a subsequent detailed analysis of the written records arising from Billy's support and Adrian's personal testimony as a participant within many face-to-face meetings.

The focus on the individual

The focus upon the individual in relation to support services is very much in evidence internationally (Rix et al, 2012). For example, many students with additional support will have Individual Education Plans; despite the wide range problems associated with their use and the lack of evidence of their effectiveness (Mitchell et al 2010). In England, this individual support focus is evident from the start of a child's life. For example, developmental journals are provided to parents, which purport to describe typical patterns of development linked to the Early Years foundation stage and for which there are specific editions for parents of deaf babies, babies with Down syndrome and babies with a visual impairment (DCSF 2009a). It is evident too in the spread of 'personalisation' (Leadbetter 2004) across all childhood and youth services, in the levels outlined in the National Curriculum, and in the focus upon the relative deficits of individual children who are seen as struggling within the education system.

In England, approximately 20% of pupils are identified as requiring some kind of additional support (DCSF 2009b). At the time of writing, a statutory statement of educational needs is issued for some of these students (2.7% in 2009), based primarily upon assessment by medical and therapeutic professionals. Proposed changes to this system (DfE 2011) would introduce an Education, Health and Care Plan still based upon individual assessment dominated by a psycho-medical perspective. A child within this system however is also assessed on a daily basis to inform lesson plans, against subject specific criteria, using observation notes and therapists' ongoing evaluations.

Recognising the child *in context*

In contrast to this focus upon the individual in isolation it has long been recognised that the self is a social process aligned to the reactions of others (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Becker 1963). As a consequence our identities and ways of being result from the socio-cultural context from which they arise. We are constrained therefore by that context and the opportunities, discourses and cultural tools which the context provides (Wertsch 1998). The process is not purely one way either. The individual is part of the developing context out of which they emerge (Rogoff 2003), and as a result participation within any human context is about the situated negotiating and renegotiating of meaning (Lave and Wenger 1991) in which we draw upon experiences within previous agentic encounters.

Learning is fundamentally associated with the context in which it occurs. It is 'an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations' (Lave & Wenger 1991, p50) involving 'changing participation in changing practices' (Lave 1996 p150). The importance of researching individual development *in context* has been acknowledged for many years. Bronfenbrenner (1977) called for research which explored human development in the context of the 'dynamic relation between person and situation' (p515) within the micro, meso, exo and macro systems of the environment. These nested levels involve the individual's immediate experiences, relations between those experiences, the constructs that influence those close to the individual but not them directly, and then the ideologies and organisation of the wider social structures that influence the ways in which the other levels operate. Such a model however still sees the individual at the centre of a range of 'independent cultural variables' (Rogoff 2003 p49).

The influence of these 'independent cultural variables' is in evidence in the ways in which the child *in context* is incorporated into support for children and young people. Aspects of provision in many countries primarily focus upon a few discrete aspects of the child's environment, bringing together a few key perspectives to share ideas and practice. Within early years, for example, the central, active role of parents and family has long been situated at the core of family-centred practice (Newman et al 2009) whilst the importance of assisting parents in their development as teachers or

co-interventionists has been seen as a major part of early intervention programs (Mahoney et al 2006; Bronfenbrenner 1974). Within approaches such as Team Around the Child (Limbrick 2010) key practitioners work together to develop 'collective competence' because 'no practitioner can be fully competent while operating independently of others' (p40). Similarly, a consultancy model is in evidence in schools throughout the UK; practitioners such as speech and language therapists visit a setting leaving activities for teachers or teaching assistants having shown how they are to be carried out with pupils. Other researchers who adopt a socio-cultural perspective such as a narrative assessment model (Cullen 2005) using a learning story approach (Carr 2001) or the mosaic approach (Clarke and Moss 2001) also focus upon the child's perspective *in context*, exploring their interactions and experiences within a setting, encouraging those around the child to challenge their own assumptions and take a more holistic view of the child. This coincides with recognition of a need to acknowledge the context of institutions as a key component in understanding a child's development (Hedegaard 2009).

At the heart of all these approaches is the practitioner trying very hard to focus their professional knowledge upon the child, but despite their emphasis on family-centred practice, children's voice and collaboration, an individualised, deficit approach is still commonplace (Lloyd 2006; Brorson 2005). This article examines parent and practitioner recognition of the significance of context, and manner in which

documenting support of the child reflects that recognition. It aims to answer two initial questions:

- Do parents and practitioners recognise the wider role played by the context of which they and the child are part?
- Do parents and practitioners apply their understanding of context within their formal assessment processes?

It then asks whether it is possible to move past the constraints which emerge if we continue to deal with context as series of 'independent cultural variables'.

Method

This first author of this article is the parent of a child who has been through early intervention programmes and other social and educational support processes; this author has wide experience of research with parents, practitioners and children, has worked as a practitioner in school and community settings, and been involved as a committee member for policy development at a governmental and national organisation level. The researcher's reflection upon these experiences is a data source and inevitably informs the analysis of the other data gathered. The names of Adrian and Billy have been changed so that there is no opportunity to identify them or the practitioners who worked with Billy or the settings in which this research was undertaken.

The research process involved two separate strands intended to answer each question separately. The first question was explored using data from ethnographic research (funded by the British Academy) with two families involved within early intervention programmes (see Paige-Smith & Rix 2011). This involved two researchers carrying out 33 observational sessions over a period of 5 months, using photography and narrative observation of the child and family in different shared spaces. The researchers made reflective notes and had 3 hours of recorded reflective discussions over this period. The parents and professionals were interviewed informally at different stages throughout the process, much of which was recorded, producing just over 7 hours of transcribed interviews. The data was analysed and then findings presented back to the participants and discussed with them. These discussions were also transcribed and analysed.

The second question was explored using an evaluation of hundreds of pages of documentation produced by the formal processes in relation to the first nine years of Billy's life. This documentation was provided by his father, Adrian. Adrian was in his fifties, within a middle income bracket, English, white and living in a rural setting. A preliminary and relatively cursory examination of 5.82kg of paperwork identified 750g (12%) which made some kind of reference to context. This selection was analysed in detail. It contained over 150 pages of:

- early intervention activity sheets
- teacher and teaching assistant annotated lesson plans

- evaluation reports from speech and language therapists, paediatricians, other medical practitioners, Portage Home Visitors, occupational therapists, teachers, nursery workers, educational psychologists and parents
- minutes of meetings with all of these individuals
- letters to and from practitioners and managers within these support systems.

The recollections of Adrian within these situations are recorded within the Discussion section later in this article. However since the first author has also found himself in many such meetings, it must be recognised that this analysis is influenced by his experiences with and without his son in attendance and in light of discussions with his partner.

Both the data sets were analysed separately from each other using grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1998), identifying concepts as they emerged from the data. The paperwork was initially analysed by the first author using open coding, with data broken into discrete parts to be closely examined and compared. The concepts were identified within the 150 pages of paperwork and relevant evidential quotes were extracted and recorded within standard word processing software, each coded with an individual font and heading level relevant to their category, creating a retrievable listing of 60 categories, and facilitating a process of Axial Coding. The interviews and observational sessions were similarly coded by the first and second author, involving 40 categories informed by the researcher's discussions and from the initial Open-coding process. As categories built up, the researchers cross-

referenced them, looking for relevant links between phenomena. For both sets of data, the process involved the adding of more information from the categories, until a situation of saturation was realised.

It is important to note the role played by the first author's personal experience in relation to early intervention processes and teaching, and also the long experience as advocates, teachers and researchers of both authors; this ethnographic research was both facilitated by and challenging of their own experiences. The discussions between the two authors of this paper around their separate data sources encouraged the first author to reflect on the professional relationships described by Adrian and to undertake an analysis of the paperwork. In particular the first author recognised that so much is spoken about off-the-record within or outside meetings which has a direct bearing upon his son, and yet is never recorded or formally recognised as having an impact upon the child. The absence of context from these records seemed a significant part of the context. In turn the discussion encouraged a renewed reflection upon the ethnographic data and analysis of the coded categories in the relation to parental and professional attitudes. As a consequence of these discussions, the theoretical sampling in examining the data was guided by the following questions:

- What evidence is there for reflection upon attitudes?
- What evidence is there for reflection upon the impact of local and national policy?

- What evidence is there for reflection upon working arrangements and practices?
- What evidence is there for reflection upon the values, practices and resources of parents, communities and settings?

It is recognised too that these questions were neither the basis for the interviews nor the official documentation. The assumption prior to exploring the data was that these issues would emerge from the data as asides and in passing.

Findings

Consideration of context by parents and professionals when interviewed and observed

Parents and practitioners seem to recognise the wider role played by context upon the child. The following themes emerged from the parent and professional interviews and observations in which recognition of the context was evident:

- relationships and spaces;
- the nature and organisation of services;

A number of concepts came together to form the theme *relationships and spaces*.

The value of everyday learning opportunities and informal situations was recognised, echoing earlier findings with parents (Rix et al 2008) and the personal

experiences of the author. One of the mothers, Rachel, noted 'the biggest thing is his experiences with the child minder' and 'being with others, and getting attention and following his peers.'

A strong message was the need to start with the child's enjoyment and an understanding of their interests; practitioners seemed to be aware that this can contradict their own priorities. Zeta recognised that although she had 'the child's ideas in mind' she was 'thinking from a child development perspective where I know where the child is and I want to help them move on, so I don't know whether that is thinking about it from a child's perspective or not'.

Practitioner priorities were not always focussed upon the child either, but could have a significant impact on the child's learning. A practitioner, Elaine had encouraged a child to chew on fibre optic cables in a soft play room; a habit which the mother in an earlier interview had told us her son sometimes did with electric wires at home.

When asked about this, Elaine said she was trying to 'reduce Mum's anxiety' in the room but 'Of course it sounds completely bonkers doesn't it'.

Relationships and spaces also contained issues of power. Alan, a father, stated that many parents feel 'very isolated', 'very under-empowered' and 'very intimidated' by much professional input. He noted how parents during sessions with practitioners get children to do things they aren't able to do merely to "maintain the flow of the

session". He recognised too that support from other parents is helpful to this relationship with professionals, that in a long term ongoing setting with other parents present "we're all genuinely excited that all the kids are doing well at their different paces for every step forwards that they take".

Rachel recognised the impact of practitioners on her mood, and significantly that her son will 'pick up anything that I'm not happy with.' The power of assumptions and situations was not necessarily recognised until raised by the researchers, however. During one session the practitioner wanted the children to copy her sound 'm'; she repeatedly said "well done" to a child, but to the observer the movements the child was being congratulated for seemed to demonstrate confusion rather than 'm'. When his mother, Rachel, was asked about the expression she recognised it immediately, saying 'now I think about it 'yes' its almost like 'help me work this out'.

The response of parents to the professional context was observed to have a direct impact on the child's relationship with the professionals too. In her reflections, the co-researcher (Paige-Smith) commented on how the skills Alan had used in showing his son how to learn, and in motivating and rewarding him, could be seen to have transferred across into the speech therapy session. In this sense the child had been prepared by the parent for the professional context. Alan seemed to recognise this commenting that the objective of early intervention was the parental learning rather than the child's.

Both practitioners and parents noted the negative impact of each other upon the child. All parents noted that there were therapies which their child hated attending. This reflected the author's experience too and the second author's earlier research (Rix & Paige-Smith 2008b), and raised the question about how such experiences prepared the children for future learning experiences. The negative impact of each other's thinking was also noted. A father, Greg, for example, hated 'dry' practitioner reports because 'every child is different'. In contrast practitioners noted the negative assumptions of families about their children and the need to provide emotional support, 'to come to terms with the diagnosis or the non-diagnosis' and the subsequent key role this played 'for the child in terms of their development'. They noted too a need to support parents to 'understand how a child would develop'.

The second major theme which emerged, the *nature and organisation of services*, did not operate entirely in isolation from the first. A concept which emerged from the views of the professionals was their supportive relationship 'over time' with parents confronting complex social support systems and 'navigating disability services'.

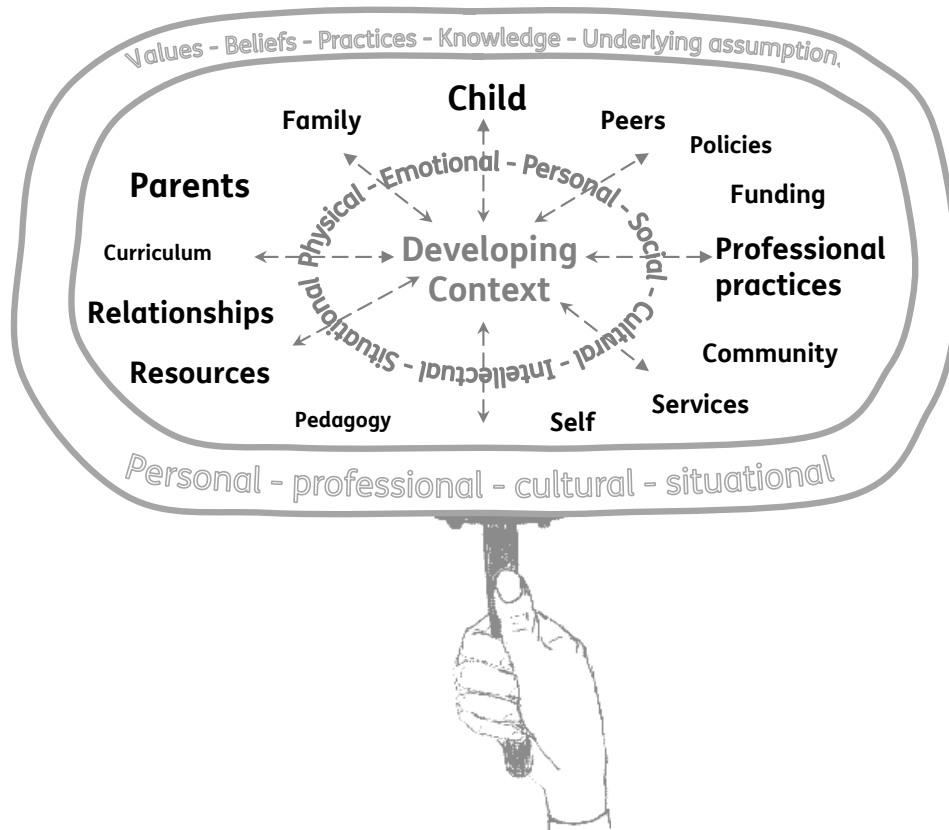
Parents recognised that the nature of the local authority (which had administrative and financial control over many childhood services) and the professionals who worked under the auspices of that local authority had a significant bearing on the consistency and quality of their experience of childhood services; but discussion of

the *nature and organisation of services* was primarily in evidence in comments from the professionals. They highlighted:

- how services differ from borough to borough,
- how access to services depends on local processes
- how joined up services result from investment
- a lack of resources
- a recognition of other profession's silo thinking

Figure 1 draws upon ideas developed by the authors. It is an attempt to represent the range of views and the reflective nature of some of the discussions. The bold and larger words highlights the areas which the discussion touched upon, whilst the smaller or faded words and symbols highlight processes and issues which emerged to a lesser degree. The hand and lens represent the self-reflection of participants. It suggests that the context is recognised to some degree, that a wide range of facets are identified and explored and there is some reflection on subject positions and ways of thinking when prompted by the questions asked.

Figure 1 – Interview view of parent and practitioner concerns (based upon Rix and Paige-Smith 2011)



Consideration of context by professionals and parents when producing formal reports

In exploring the hundreds of pages of documentation produced over the first nine years of the Billy's life, the following broad themes encapsulated the vast majority of concepts which considered factors beyond the child:

- Detailed description
- Focus on adult support

- Focus on behaviour and compliance
- Generalised observations with peers

Detailed description was in evidence particularly in the notes made by teaching assistants, and in reports of classroom observation by outside professionals. These comments tended to be descriptive in nature, focussing upon Billy's performance on a task or in a situation, with the occasional judgement upon his performance; generally there was no reference to other people, and if reference was made then it would be in passing; for example:

Number work sheet – more or less. *Billy understood that we needed to do our number before he could play in the sand. Followed directions well.*

Making the flowers/cutting for mothers Day card. *Billy cut, Mary [TA] turning paper, chose colour told me yellow, said 'k' 'k' for pink and red. Put glue on. Stuck them on. Chose sand as reward.*

Focus on adult support was in evidence across all reports. Comments about appropriate activities for Billy to undertake or successes or failures were made in relation to a generalised adult being in attendance. Children are not positioned as capable of carrying out the same role; for example:

He initiates contact with peers and adults alike and interacts well with many of the younger children.

Billy is happy to do activities with an adult.

With adult help, he can manage a 5-hole shape-sorter

Focus on behaviour and compliance was particularly in evidence in official reports from outside professionals when focussing upon issues of concern and within meeting documentation. Although the number of comments was small, its presence signified considerable effort and challenges, and commonly raised an issue that had been discussed at some length outside of the formal documentation; for example:

Biggest challenge is supporting behaviour and it sometimes takes two adults to manage. A draft behaviour plan has been written to ensure consistency.

Generalised observations with peers was in evidence across all reports. Only on five occasions was a specific child identified with whom Billy was engaged (a different category), and on two of those occasions it was his sister who was identified. These generalised comments were frequent and tended to be vague, brief descriptions about interaction with one child or a group; for example:

Recently, Billy and his peer group chose to construct a marble run:
Billy constructed his run with support from his peer group
The group counted the marbles, shared and took turns.
Billy concentrated on this activity for 20-30 minutes

There were a number of other categories which emerged which were in evidence far less frequently, but which seemed to offer opportunities for an exploration of context. One such category, *Billy can do in context*, appeared only once:

Turn taking skills. He can now spontaneously join in ball games in the playground and no longer needs adult support to sustain this. When working 1:1 with an adult Billy can also take part in simple board games and verbal games, taking his turn to add appropriate phrases modelled by the adult. He can continue with this with a small group of his peers joining the game. Billy still finds it difficult to take turns during free play contexts when he wants other to follow his lead!

The difference between *Billy can do in context* and the *Detailed description of involvement with others*, may seem negligible at first, but it is only in a couple of the documents that we see evidence of reflection upon how an intervention acts as a bridge for Billy, scaffolding his participation and learning with others. This is particularly important in relation to facilitating inclusion, not only because of research into effective pedagogies (Rix et al 2009; Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011) but also because when strategies are described or provision is recommended it frequently falls into the category: *Provision described is no different to other children's*.

Apart from this single example of scaffolding, the focus when describing activities tends to be upon their practical use rather than their interest or relevance to him

Today I took along some 'pairs' cards which are a good size for Billy to handle and are quite robust.

Terms such as 'enjoys' and 'likes' and 'interested' were noticeable by their absence. They are primarily in evidence in a single document produced by Adrian which outlined Billy's interests and understandings for the playgroup and school.

Given the significance of relationships and spaces and the nature and organisation of services in the data collected from parents and practitioners, it was interesting to note the lack of discussion about them in the paperwork. Unsurprisingly, in the home visitor documents there was considerable mention of parental reports of activities undertaken with the child in the home, but across all the school and nursery documentation there was only one mention of *Activity in a home school context*. Similarly there was only one mention of *Policy* across all the documents. It was also noted that there was only one strategy that was discussed as not working (PECS) and yet issues that were cause for concern commonly reoccurred.

In the data collected from parents and practitioners contradictions in practice and in evidence were the basis for positive reflection, however there was no evidence of this within the paperwork. Figure 2 is an attempt to represent the views expressed within the 150 pages of documentation. The bold and larger words highlights the areas which the discussion touched upon, whilst the smaller or faded words and symbols highlight processes and issues which emerged to a lesser degree. It suggests that the context is hardly visible at all, that the focus (if you include the child as a variable) is upon three 'independent cultural variables'. The absence of

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the hand and lens represent the lack of reflection on subject positions and ways of thinking within the document view.

Figure 2: – Document view of parent and practitioner concerns

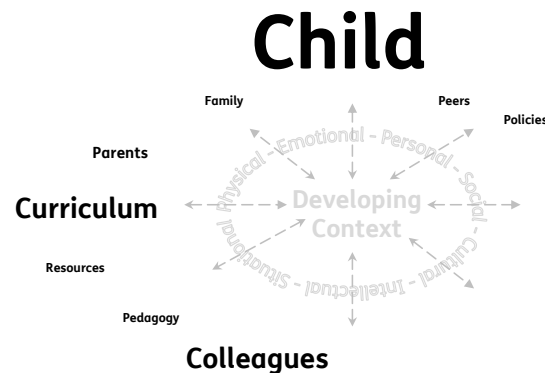


Table 1: The contrast between what is said and what is recorded

Consideration of context by professionals and parents in interviews	Consideration of context by professionals and parents in documentation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every day learning opportunities and informal situations • The child's enjoyment and an understanding of their interests • Practitioner priorities- (particularly developmental model and parental concerns and/or lack of 'knowledge') • Power balance and relationships between parents, practitioners and children • Relationships with other parents • Parental capacity to prepare a child for professional settings • Parental negativity • Practitioner negativity • Formal assessment processes • Negative impact of therapeutic settings • Automatic assumptions about a child • Child's sensitivity to parental mood • Supportive relationship with parents confronting complex social support systems • How services differ from borough to borough, • How access to services depends on local processes • How joined up services result from investment • A lack of resources • A recognition of other profession's silo thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive comments focussing child on a task or in a situation, with occasional judgements on his performance • Comments about appropriate activities in relation to a generalised adult (not other child) being in attendance. • Comments on child's behaviour and compliance • Brief description of child's interaction with peers (but only 5 mentions of specific relationship moments with another child) • Strategies which are typically no different to other children's. <p><u>Only 1 mention in 150 pages</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection upon how to scaffold his participation and learning <u>with others</u> • Child's enjoyment • Activity in a home school context • Policy • Strategy not working

Discussion

The analysis of the data above was shown to Adrian. Adrian reflected that he and his partner had attended numerous formal and informal meetings with practitioners. As parents, they had been made aware that speech and language provision, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and educational psychology were services which were perceived to be under resourced within their local authority. They had discussed the re-grading of staff, the changing in funding for statements and the reorganisation of services and how this impacted upon how the school and their son could be supported. They had discussed the difficult relationships between staff and their son; the negative, positive and shifting attitudes of different staff members; the need to provide coterminous activities for school and home; the importance of communication between home and school; the failure to transition Billy effectively to a new class; the struggles of a teacher to creatively resolve issues; the ill health of a head teacher; a view of Billy as being 'a big ask'; which class he should be in; who Billy would like to come to his birthday party; how hard teachers found it to deal with Billy; their expectations of what he could achieve; their training needs; how he had been the best CPD (Continuing professional development) a teacher had ever had; how he had reinvigorated a love of teaching; and so on and so forth. Strategies, policies, practices, views and beliefs had been shared and considered. But none of these issues (or others Adrian identified) had appeared within the documentation.

The first author had come to recognise the importance of such discussion, but it seemed significant to him that he was not alone in seeing their importance. As is evident from the first data set, parents and practitioners recognise the significance of context. There is an understanding of the power within their relationships which effects how they deal with each other, their consequent feelings and its impact upon the child's learning. There is a recognition that the formal, dry assessment processes can alienate and exclude parents, and that parents need support to cope practically and emotionally with systems which focus on the child's 'development'. They recognise too the role played by the organisation and nature of services available, local variation in this availability, the significance of local and national funding and attitudes of different professionals, the breadth of support needed and the fluid nature of support, and the impact that all this has upon families and children. Parents and practitioners also recognised the need to focus upon the child's interests and their relationships with their peers and to challenge their own preconceptions. All of this is noticeable by its absence from the second set of data (see Table 1).

This focus upon the individual child, largely in isolation from the essential context in which they are developing, misses out the majority of key issues relevant to their support and development. It ignores the continuously changing circumstances that arise from the moment by moment negotiations and decisions that involve all the

participants, their support networks and the policies and established practices and resources with which they work. This article is not suggesting that this is a deliberate decision on behalf of the practitioners to hide problems and issues. It is a consequence of an in-person, deficit mind-set and funding streams and support networks which focus upon the individual and their support outcomes. Just as has been identified with nurses, the systems used to record information socialise them into a 'thought world' which integrates top down criteria into day to day practice (Bowker & Leigh Star 1999, p272).

Practitioners (and parents) are also trying to simplify a complex world:

Part of the skill of work, all work, then is routinization, adapting the particulars of the world so that they fit within the general schemas of the organization. The gap to be bridged lies between reality and process, and it is bridged by the improvisation inherent in practice – so deeply inherent that the practitioners themselves are barely aware of it....This adaptation is aptly reflected in the wonder and the problems of forms, Forms are the crucial means by which an organisation brings the heterogeneous world into line with its processes. (Brown & Duguid 2000, p108)

Practitioners and parents talk about the reality, but they record the process. By not recording the negative consequences of practices and systems they are reinforcing

those practices and systems. They are not recording the complexity and contradictions inherent in their workplace and so they imply that the struggle lies elsewhere. From a social model perspective (Oliver, 1983; Finkelstein, 2001) they are failing to describe the ways in which society's construction disables the child. From an educational perspective, because of an expectation that they should assess the child as an individual and not the collective relationships, their focus is away from the context in which inclusive learning opportunities arise.

This need to focus upon collective relationships is gaining recognition in some countries. Within Northern Italy for example there is a recognition that resources need to focus upon the class context:

If we have integrate a child with learning difficulties in a class with there are 25 students and 15 are foreign, so have difficulties, and 4 are social service, it's a really complex situation. The same child I let him get inside in another school, with the context is different, small classes, parents.... I need less resources there. I don't need as much resources in that place so it's not the disability of the child, it's just the context. (The view of an Italian Principal - Rix et al, 2013, p146).

Such a view is driving changes in assessment and allocation of funds. It also requires that practitioners and parents are asked to look in a different way. It involves discussions about weaknesses and strengths of everyone in the class,

challenges and opportunities, possible ways forward and barriers to be overcome. It cannot easily be fitted into a traditional individual assessment profile. It should not become a check-list for context either, ticking off factors to be considered, as this would soon become one more professional process with the potential to alienate practitioners and parents.

The data suggest that there is a need to encourage discussion and the means to capture that discussion. A classroom observation would not focus upon the individual child but the context. The practitioners would be expected to reflect on peer groups' interactions, opportunities provided by the curriculum or pedagogy, policy and resource constraints, their own strengths and shortcomings, the responses of others, attitudes they witness or experience. Such reflections would inform wider planning discussions, and both could be used to inform funding and support bureaucratic decisions.

By necessity a planning meeting would more closely resemble a set of minutes from a committee meeting, reflecting topics of discussion with action points. The key would be what is on the agenda. So, for example, if an issue was identified for a child or group of children (eg: signing for communication, fine motor skill difficulties, reading challenges; challenging behaviour) the discussion would need to consider variously: the local offer, current capacity, willingness to undertake training and develop practice, funding availability, peer learning opportunities, as well as which

programme might be adopted and research evidence for what is being proposed.

Practitioners and parents would be expected to discuss what they cannot do, as well as what they might be able to do and why. The current dominant psycho-medical developmental model would be situated as one strand amongst many; sometimes of relevance to a discussion but oftentimes not. This examination of current practices and necessary experience or resources would underpin action points and targets. They may be informed by broad headings, such as teaching and support staff, school organisation, support service organisation, policy parameters, research, individuals and groups within a class, community links, collaborative opportunities, but would not be limited to them or constrained by them. There could not be an expectation that everything has to be discussed every time, but that people are used to considering these variables, a broad range of relationships and the possibilities they provide.

Creating an aspiration and expectation for such records would also raise awareness of the difficulties which practitioners face; parents might have the information they need to agitate for better management and funding; all those involved may have clearer expectations about what can be achieved in the current situation and a better understanding of the attitudes which surround their child. In having this recorded there would be a growing collective understanding of the challenges which families and services face so they might be more clearly addressed. The possible questions might be as varied as the contexts which need to be drawn upon, but the

discussion would recognise that people can only develop as part of a context which is developing around them and upon which they have an influence.

Conclusions

This article advocates a need to move from the current position in which we either evaluate the child largely in isolation of context, or in relation to some of the facets of that context, to a position in which we are assessing the context in which we are all developing and in which the child is an important player. The challenge is for practitioners to recognise that formally exploring the context in which they provide support would provide both themselves and those they work with tools for reflection and advocacy. This article suggests that this will be facilitated if we view the child as *a participant within context* not simply *in context*.

If we are to acknowledge the developing context of which we all *are* and of which our systems, process, policies, institutions and practices *are* we need to move beyond a model in which a holistic view of the child is simply a focus upon a few 'independent cultural variables'. This requires that assessment processes acknowledge our own perspective's influence on the situation and also consider the constraints which are acting upon us. By focussing understanding of development upon the individual, the psycho-medical model of development comes to dominate encouraging a notion of the child as in some way in-deficit; as a consequence we

overlook the collective and personal relationships that *are* the context and which most of us recognise to be at the heart of learning and participation.

This research presumes however that if we see the child as fundamentally interwoven with the social contexts in which we operate we are more likely to discover opportunities for learning and to facilitate the child's participation in activities which have meaning for all concerned. We develop too, processes by which to drive change in our own practices, processes and working systems. By examining where we *are* and seeing the child as a participant in context, we can identify opportunities for disrupting barriers to engagement, scaffolding change which can benefit the collective even within a political and practice environment traditionally focussed upon the individual.

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